

Dark Night of the Soul

Saint John of the Cross



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PREFACE

Saint John of the Cross is one of the great masters of spiritual life. His writings, filled with mystical depth and poetic beauty, have enlightened countless souls on their journey toward union with God. However, his language, characteristic of the Spanish Golden Age, can be difficult for the modern reader to understand—not only because of the natural evolution of the language, but also due to the conceptual and symbolic richness with which the saint expresses the experience of the dark night of the soul.

The purpose of this version is to offer a more accessible reading of his work, preserving its message and depth intact, while expressing it in modern English. This is not a reinterpretation or a simplification, but rather a linguistic update that enables today's readers to approach the wisdom of Saint John of the Cross with greater clarity.

Every effort has been made to respect the original structure and style, avoiding alterations to its content and ensuring that the beauty of his thought remains intact. This adaptation does not intend to replace the classical text, but rather to serve as a doorway for those who wish to benefit from its teachings without being hindered by the difficulty of the language.

We hope this version facilitates an encounter with the spiritual richness of Saint John of the Cross and helps those who seek in his message light and guidance for their own inner journey.

Introduction to the Work

Saint John of the Cross wrote *The Dark Night* in the second half of the 16th century, in the context of the Carmelite Reform led by Saint Teresa of Ávila. His work stands as one of the peaks of mystical literature and offers a detailed guide to the process of spiritual purification that the soul undergoes on its path toward union with God.

The origin of *The Dark Night* is closely tied to Saint John of the Cross's own experience. In 1577, while working on the reform of the Carmelite Order, he was arrested by his own fellow friars—the calced Carmelites—who opposed the changes promoted by the discalced. For nine months, he endured harsh captivity in Toledo, where he suffered deprivation and punishment. It was during this time of confinement and suffering that much of his mystical thought took shape. There, in his cell, he composed the first verses of his renowned *Dark Night of the Soul*, which he then memorized and recited to avoid forgetting them, as he had no writing materials. After his escape in 1578, he resumed his reformist work and, beginning in 1584, started writing his prose commentaries on these verses, offering a profound explanation of their mystical and spiritual meaning.

Saint Teresa of Ávila had a profound influence on the work of Saint John of the Cross, not only in its content but also in its structure and approach. From the outset

of the Carmelite Reform, Teresa considered him her principal collaborator and confidant, shaping his vision of spiritual life. Her teaching on the “night of the soul,” understood as a necessary purification to attain union with God, laid the foundation for the development of *The Dark Night*. Moreover, the very structure of the work—with one poetic part and another in prose commentary—reflects the method Teresa employed in her writings, especially in *The Interior Castle*.

The first readers of *The Dark Night* were the Discalced Carmelites themselves, who found in the work a guide for spiritual life and mystical contemplation. His writings initially circulated in manuscript form within the order, being copied and studied by his disciples and followers. It was not until after his death in 1591 that his work began to spread more widely. The first printed edition of *The Dark Night* appeared in the 17th century, alongside other works of his, and was met with admiration in mystical and theological circles.

However, the depth and radical nature of his message also aroused suspicion among more conservative sectors of the Church, especially in the context of the Inquisition, which viewed some expressions of mysticism with distrust. Despite this, the work of Saint John of the Cross was never condemned and eventually became a cornerstone of Christian spirituality. His influence extended beyond the bounds of the Carmelite order, inspiring generations of theologians, writers, and spiritual seekers across various traditions.

The historical context in which this work emerged was one of a Spain deeply marked by the Counter-Reformation and the Inquisition. The spirituality of the Golden Age was characterized by a strong tension between doctrinal orthodoxy and mystical currents that sought a more direct relationship with God. In this environment, Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Ávila promoted a renewal of spiritual life grounded in contemplative prayer and radical detachment from worldly things.

The Dark Night is not merely a description of the soul’s suffering in its process of purification; it is also a work of hope. Through this profound inner transformation, the soul is led to the fullness of divine love. Saint John of the Cross uses the image of night as a metaphor for the disorientation and pain the soul experiences when God deprives it of sensible consolations in order to bring it into deeper union with Him.

Centuries later, this work remains a fundamental reference for those seeking to understand the spiritual path in its deepest dimension. Its message transcends eras and traditions, for it clearly describes the universal experience of the soul in its search for God.

To conclude this preface, we recall the words with which Edgar Allison Peers, the renowned British Hispanist and profound scholar of Spanish mysticism of the Golden Age, closed his own English translation of *The Dark Night of the Soul* in 1952. His assessment, full of admiration and reverence, captures with precision the greatness of the work now before the reader:

"It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the verse and prose works combined of St. John of the Cross form at once the most grandiose and the most melodious spiritual canticle to which any one man has ever given utterance. The most sublime of all the Spanish mystics, he soars aloft on the wings of Divine love to heights known to hardly any of them... True to the character of his thought, his style is always forceful and energetic, even to a fault. When we study his treatises, we have the impression of a mastermind that has scaled the heights of mystical science; and from their summit looks down upon and dominates the plain below and the paths leading upward... Nowhere else, again, is he quite so appealingly human; for, though he is human even in his loftiest and sublimest passages, his intermingling of philosophy with mystical theology; makes him seem particularly so."

STRUCTURE OF THE WORK

Dark Night of the Soul stands as one of the pinnacles of Christian mysticism and universal spiritual literature. In it, Saint John of the Cross presents, with extraordinary depth, the process of purification that the soul must undergo in order to attain union with God. The metaphor of the “dark night” symbolizes a painful yet necessary passage in which the soul is stripped of all sensory consolation and even of its own way of understanding God, so that it may be elevated to a purer and more selfless relationship with Him.

The structure of the work follows the verses of a series of songs written by Saint John of the Cross at the beginning of his treatise. These *songs of the soul* serve as a poetic and theological guide for the entire doctrinal exposition. There are a total of eight stanzas that summarize the spiritual transformation the soul undergoes on its journey toward union with God.

Book One: The Night of the Senses

This first book unfolds the explanation of the complete first stanza: “*On a dark night, inflamed with love and yearnings...*”

Here, Saint John of the Cross explains the dark night of the senses, which is the purification of sensory and emotional attachments in the spiritual life. The soul ceases to find pleasure in prayer, in spiritual consolations, and in the sensitive experiences that once brought it joy. This dryness is not a punishment, but a divine method of freeing the soul from its dependence on the senses and preparing it for a deeper relationship with God.

Saint John of the Cross describes the spiritual vices that affect beginners in the interior life—such as pride, greed, and spiritual gluttony—showing how these faults must be corrected for the soul to advance. It is a process of detachment that, though painful, is essential for spiritual progress.

The central teaching of this book is that a true relationship with God is not based on feelings or consolations, but on pure faith and total trust in His will, even in darkness.

Book Two: The Night of the Spirit

This second book corresponds to the explanation of the second stanza: “*In darkness and secure, by the secret ladder, in disguise...*”

Here, a deeper state of purification is described: the dark night of the spirit. The soul is not only deprived of sensory consolations but also loses its intellectual certainties and habitual ways of understanding God. It is a phase of even greater darkness and inner suffering, where the soul experiences confusion, emptiness, and desolation.

Saint John of the Cross explains that this process is necessary because even in its understanding of God, the soul remains attached to limited, human concepts.

God leads it into total darkness so that it may learn to trust fully in Him without supports or certainties.

At this point, the soul experiences temptations, doubts, and a profound sense of abandonment—similar to the “night of the spirit” that Christ endured in Gethsemane. Yet this state is the prelude to the transforming union with God, where the soul, now fully purified, reaches the summit of spiritual life.

The great teaching of this second part is that spiritual fullness is attained only when the soul has been completely emptied of itself, allowing God to become its only light.

Book Three: The Song of the Soul United with God

Dark Night of the Soul does not end with Chapter 25. Saint John of the Cross only comments on the second complete song and then begins the third. However, the work remains unfinished.

Saint John only managed to comment on the first verse of the third song:

*“On that happy night,
in secret, when no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything,
with no other light or guide
than the one burning in my heart.”*

And there it stops. Although he mentions that he will explain its three properties—and does so briefly—he does not develop the remainder of the song or its subsequent verses as he had done with the earlier ones.

Therefore, Chapter 25 of Book Two is indeed the final complete chapter of the work and marks the end of the preserved commentary. The third song, as it appears at the beginning of the book with its five verses, is left without a full exegesis.

Why did he not continue? We do not know for certain. Some scholars suggest that Saint John was interrupted by other pastoral duties or by illness. Others believe he considered it sufficient as it stood, or that his oral commentary was more extensive and simply never put into writing.

What is certain is that the structure is outlined, the third song is introduced... but the work ends with the explanation of its first verse.

This third book has been written in fidelity to the spirit and style of Saint John of the Cross, as a respectful and contemplative simulation. It continues the exegesis of the remaining verses, not only of the third song but also of the fourth through eighth songs, which Saint John himself left uncommented.

Each book, then, is structured around one or more songs. The first book follows the first stanza; the second, the complete second stanza. The third begins with the third stanza—which Saint John left incomplete—and continues with the fourth through the eighth stanzas in a coherent and organic way.

This development does not aim to complete the work as if it were an authorial addition, but rather to offer the contemporary reader a guided meditation on the mystical transformation these songs express. Each chapter of this third book addresses a verse or a significant portion thereof, maintaining the rhythm and tone of the original, and seeking above all to be useful and illuminating for anyone wishing to better understand the soul's union with God.

Conclusion

Dark Night of the Soul is a work of immense theological and psychological depth, offering a detailed guide to the inner purification that every believer must undergo on the path to God. Saint John of the Cross precisely describes the obstacles, trials, and sufferings the soul encounters, but also the transformation that occurs when it learns to surrender itself entirely into God's hands.

Beyond its mystical content, this work also holds great universal value, as it portrays the human struggle with its own limitations, ego, and need for transcendence. It remains a relevant book even today, because it speaks to the process of spiritual maturation and the importance of total surrender to truth—even when that truth is hidden in darkness.

BIOGRAPHY

Saint John of the Cross, born Juan de Yepes Álvarez, came into the world on June 24, 1542, in Fontiveros, a modest village in the province of Ávila, Spain. From his earliest years, his life was marked by humility and the hardships of a family with scarce resource, circumstances that, far from limiting him, deeply shaped his spirituality and worldview. The son of Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Álvarez, he inherited not only a legacy of poverty and social marginalization but also essential values such as unshakable faith, material detachment, and unconditional love. These would become foundational pillars of his mystical experience and his relationship with God. His humble origins were not an obstacle but rather the fertile soil in which one of the most profound and luminous voices of Christian mysticism took root.

Childhood and Family: Roots of His Spirituality

Gonzalo de Yepes, Juan's father, came from a family of Jewish converts in Toledo—an identity that, in 16th-century Spain, carried a heavy burden of social marginalization and religious discrimination. He was disinherited by his family after marrying Catalina Álvarez, a humble woman of peasant origin, which plunged the family into extreme poverty. This disinheritance taught Gonzalo to live detached from material possessions, a value he passed on to his son. This material detachment became a fundamental pillar of Saint John of the Cross's spirituality, in which inner emptiness and renunciation lead to union with God.

The converso-Jewish identity of his father, marked by social exclusion, instilled in Juan a sensitivity to marginalization and a spiritual quest that transcended social constructs. This is reflected in his mystical teaching on stripping away the ego and discovering divine identity through union with God.

Catalina Álvarez, on the other hand, after Gonzalo's death when Juan was only three years old, lived in extreme poverty, working tirelessly as a weaver and seamstress to support her children. Her selflessness taught Juan the value of sacrifice and loving dedication—values that appear in his writings as symbols of divine love. Catalina possessed an unbreakable faith and serene patience in the face of suffering and hardship. This spiritual strength influenced Juan, who developed a spirituality rooted in patience and hope amid the *dark night of the soul*—the spiritual emptiness necessary to attain mystical union with God.

Catalina also taught him to love unconditionally, embodying a universal maternal love that Juan later projected into his mystical vision of divine love. This unconditional love is the driving force behind the mystical union described in his writings, where the soul is united with God through a pure and selfless love.

Early Years and Education

During his early years, his mother, Catalina, struggled to raise her three sons in conditions of great poverty. The family moved to Medina del Campo in search of

better opportunities. There, Juan attended the Colegio de los Niños de la Doctrina, a free school for poor children where he learned to read, write, and recite prayers. From a young age, he showed a reflective and contemplative nature, often distancing himself from children's games to devote time to prayer and meditation. He was also known for his kindness and compassion toward the poor, frequently sharing his meager food with other needy children.

To help his mother, he worked as an altar boy at the Church of San Juan Bautista and as a nurse at the Hospital de las Bubas, a hospital for patients suffering from syphilis. This experience deeply marked him, as he cared for terminally ill patients, cleaning their wounds and accompanying them in their final moments. It was through this direct contact with human suffering that he developed a profound compassion and a vocation for service, later reflected in his mystical spirituality.

From childhood, he experienced social marginalization due to his converso background and poverty. Though not directly persecuted, he lived in a society obsessed with blood purity, where being of Jewish descent was a source of suspicion and exclusion. This experience influenced his mystical vision of detachment from the ego and social constructs, in pursuit of a universal spiritual identity that transcended social and religious boundaries.

Youth and Religious Vocation

At the age of seventeen, Juan entered the Jesuit College in Medina del Campo, where he studied grammar, rhetoric, humanities, and Latin. During this period, he became familiar with the works of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas, developing an analytical and philosophical mindset. He also studied classical literature and lyrical poetry, which would later influence his mystical poetic style.

In 1563, at the age of twenty-one, he entered the Carmelite Convent of Santa Ana in Medina del Campo, taking the name Fray Juan de San Matías. From the outset, he demonstrated a deep vocation for contemplative prayer and asceticism. He was noted for his austerity, discipline, and dedication to spiritual life. However, he was dissatisfied with the lax observance within the Carmelite Order at the time and longed for a more austere and contemplative way of life.

In 1564, he made his first vows as a Carmelite and was sent to study at the University of Salamanca, one of the most prestigious theological centers in Europe. There, he studied philosophy, scholastic theology, and Sacred Scripture under the guidance of Fray Luis de León, a prominent poet and theologian. At Salamanca, Juan delved into Augustinian mysticism and scholastic theology, developing an intellectual and contemplative approach to faith.

Despite his academic success, he felt a deep spiritual dissatisfaction. He wrestled with the decision to remain in the Carmelite Order or join the Carthusians, a monastic order known for its extreme austerity and contemplative life.

Encounter with Saint Teresa of Ávila

The meeting between Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Ávila was a pivotal moment that not only changed the course of their lives but also transformed the

direction of mystical spirituality within the Catholic world. This providential encounter, which took place in 1567 in Medina del Campo, marked the beginning of the Carmelite Reform—a movement rooted in a return to the primitive rule of the Carmelites, centered on austerity, contemplation, and loving God through interior silence. The spiritual collaboration between these two saints is regarded as one of the most powerful mystical alliances in the history of Christianity, characterized by a deep spiritual connection and mutual recognition of their mystical vocations.

Context Prior to the Encounter

Before meeting, Saint Teresa of Ávila had already begun her reform of the female branch of the Carmelite Order with the foundation of the Convent of Saint Joseph in Ávila in 1562. Her goal was to restore the strict observance of the Carmelite Primitive Rule, marked by poverty, silence, and contemplative prayer. However, Teresa's vision extended beyond reforming the female branch—she sought male collaborators who shared her mystical and reformist vision in order to establish monasteries of Discalced Carmelite friars.

For his part, John of the Cross, after joining the Carmelite Order and studying at the University of Salamanca, was disillusioned by the relaxation of discipline and the lack of contemplation in the Carmelite observance of his time. Though he had professed vows as a Carmelite and stood out for his dedication to spiritual life, he longed for a more austere and contemplative existence. In fact, he was considering leaving the Carmelite Order to enter the Carthusian monastery—an extremely austere and contemplative order—when fate brought him into contact with Saint Teresa.

The Meeting in Medina del Campo (1567)

The encounter took place in 1567 in Medina del Campo, when John returned to his hometown to celebrate his first Mass after being ordained a priest. Saint Teresa had traveled to Medina del Campo to found the second convent of Discalced Carmelite nuns. Upon meeting John, she immediately perceived his mystical spirit and his burning desire for a more austere and contemplative life. In him, she recognized the ideal collaborator to extend her reform to the male branch of the Carmelite Order.

During their conversation, Saint Teresa shared her vision of the Carmelite Reform: a return to the Primitive Rule that entailed a life of continuous prayer, austerity, detachment from material goods, interior silence, and profound love of God. She spoke of a Discalced Carmelite life rooted in solitude, contemplation, and humility. John was deeply moved by her mystical vision and love for God, seeing in her a living example of holiness and total surrender.

John confessed to Teresa his desire to leave the Carmelite Order and join the Carthusians in pursuit of a more contemplative life. However, Teresa persuaded him not to abandon the Carmelites but rather to join her reform in order to revitalize Carmelite spirituality from within. She told him, “There are already plenty of Carthusians in the world, but there are few men willing to live like the ancient prophets of Elijah.”

This statement profoundly touched John, who then agreed to join the Teresian Reform.

This encounter was mystical and providential—a mutual spiritual recognition. Saint Teresa saw in John the soul of a pure contemplative, a mystic of deep prayer capable of living in austerity and detachment. For his part, John found in Teresa a spiritual mother and mystical guide, someone who embodied the burning love for God that he too longed for.

The Birth of the Discalced Carmelites (1568)

In 1568, Saint Teresa and John of the Cross took the first step toward reforming the male branch of the Carmelite Order. They chose a remote and humble place: Duruelo, a small village in the province of Ávila, surrounded by solitary and austere countryside. The choice was not accidental; it symbolized detachment from the world and the search for solitude and silence.

On November 28, 1568, together with Friar Antonio of Jesus, John founded the first convent of the Discalced Carmelites in a rustic farmhouse converted into a hermitage. In a simple ceremony, John changed his religious name to “John of the Cross” and donned the brown habit and white mantle without a cape—the distinctive attire of the Discalced Carmelites, symbolizing humility, penance, and detachment. Barefoot as a sign of absolute poverty, they consecrated themselves to a life of continual prayer, austerity, and contemplative silence.

Life in Duruelo was one of extreme austerity. They subsisted on bread, water, and a few vegetables, slept on straw mats on the floor, devoted long hours to prayer and silence, and engaged in manual labor to sustain the community. Saint Teresa described the scene upon visiting Duruelo: “They seemed more like angels than men, absorbed in prayer and divine love.”

This ascetic and contemplative way of life was a radical return to the origins of the Carmelite tradition, inspired by Elijah and the early hermits of Mount Carmel. For John, this lifestyle represented the perfect path to mystical union with God, based on inner emptiness and detachment from all earthly consolation. It was here that he composed some of his earliest mystical poems, born of his experience of contemplation and burning love for God.

Expansion of the Reform and Spiritual Collaboration

Following the foundation of Duruelo, the Carmelite Reform began to spread rapidly. Male convents were established in Mancera de Abajo, Pastrana, and Alcalá de Henares, extending the spirit of austerity, silence, and contemplation. During this period, Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross maintained a profound spiritual relationship, grounded in mutual respect and mystical love. They corresponded through letters and shared their experiences of prayer and mystical visions. John became Teresa’s spiritual director, helping her delve deeper into her mystical experiences.

Saint Teresa described John as “half friar, half angel,” acknowledging his deep contemplative life and extreme humility. Both shared the vision of a Carmelite order

rooted in burning love for God, interior silence, and absolute detachment. Together, they revolutionized the mystical spirituality of their time, giving birth to a universal mystical tradition.

Later Encounters and Spiritual Relationship

Although they met in person on only five documented occasions, the spiritual and mystical bond between Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Ávila was profound and enduring. They remained united in spirit through prayer and spiritual correspondence. In 1572, at Teresa's request, John was called to Ávila to serve as confessor and spiritual director of the Convent of the Incarnation, where Teresa was prioress. There, he had a deep spiritual influence on the nuns, including Ana de Jesús and Ana de San Bartolomé, close collaborators of Teresa.

During this period, John began writing his first mystical poems, inspired by his contemplative prayer and profound interior life. Teresa, in turn, encouraged him to express his mystical experiences in poetic language, urging him to write works such as the *Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*. Their spiritual relationship was characterized by a continuous mystical exchange, in which they helped each other discern their experiences of union with God.

The encounter with Saint Teresa transformed John of the Cross's life and led him to embrace his mystical vocation as a reformer and poet of divine union. Their spiritual alliance forged one of the most profound and universal mystical currents in history—a path of love and detachment that continues to resonate in contemporary spirituality. Their relationship was not only fundamental to the Carmelite Reform but also left a lasting spiritual and literary legacy that continues to inspire seekers of God around the world.

Persecution and Imprisonment

The Carmelite Reform, led by Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross, met with strong opposition from the Calced Carmelites, who rejected the return to austerity and strict observance of the primitive rule. The Calced Carmelites, having adopted a more relaxed and less rigorous lifestyle, saw the Reform as a threat to their way of life and authority within the Order. This tension between the Discalced and Calced Carmelites escalated over time, reaching a critical point in 1577.

In December of that year, Saint John of the Cross was arrested by order of the superiors of the Calced Carmelites. He was taken to the Monastery of Toledo, where he was imprisoned in a small, dark cell—virtually a dungeon. The conditions of his confinement were inhumane: the cell lacked proper ventilation, was cold and damp, and received almost no natural light. John was held in total isolation, with no contact with the outside world and meager food rations, consisting mainly of bread and water. In addition, he was subjected to physical and psychological abuse, regularly beaten and humiliated by his captors.

This nine-month period of imprisonment was one of the most severe trials in the life of Saint John of the Cross. The cell became the setting for a profound *dark night of the soul*—a spiritual experience of desolation, emptiness, and apparent

abandonment by God. Yet, amid this extreme suffering, John found strength in his faith and in his mystical union with God. It was in this very cell that he composed much of his most famous poem, *Dark Night of the Soul*, writing in secret on scraps of paper and seizing moments of solitude granted by his captors.

The poem *Dark Night of the Soul* is a masterpiece of mystical literature in which John describes the interior purification the soul must undergo to reach union with God. He uses the metaphor of the dark night to represent spiritual emptiness and the detachment from all earthly consolation—a necessary state for the soul to be illumined by divine presence. Through deeply symbolic verses, John expresses how, in the midst of darkness and suffering, the soul finds the light of God:

*“On a dark night,
inflamed with love and yearnings—
oh, blessed fortune!—
I went out unseen,
my house now at rest.”*

These verses reflect not only his personal experience of purification in the cell of Toledo but also his mystical teaching that suffering and emptiness are necessary paths to union with God.

In August 1578, after nine months of imprisonment, Saint John of the Cross miraculously escaped his cell. With the help of a Discalced Carmelite nun, who gave him a rope and guided him on how to descend through a window, John fled the monastery in the middle of the night. Though the descent was perilous, and he nearly fell, he reached the ground safely. He found refuge at the Convent of the Discalced Carmelite nuns in Toledo, where he was joyfully and gratefully received by the sisters, who cared for him and protected him from his persecutors.

This miraculous escape marked not only the end of his imprisonment but also became a symbol of divine providence and John’s spiritual resilience. Despite the terrible conditions he had endured, his faith remained unbroken; on the contrary, his experience in the Toledo cell deepened his understanding of the *dark night of the soul* and reinforced his commitment to the Carmelite Reform.

After his escape, John moved to Andalusia, where he continued founding convents and promoting the Reform. However, the experience of imprisonment left an indelible mark on his life and work. The *dark night of the soul* became a central theme of his spirituality, and his poem of the same name remains one of the most profound and moving expressions of Christian mysticism.

In summary, the imprisonment of Saint John of the Cross was not merely an episode of persecution and suffering, but also a moment of profound spiritual transformation. Through this experience, John not only solidified his mystical teaching but also demonstrated an unbreakable faith and a burning love for God—qualities

that made him one of the most influential mystics in the history of Christian spirituality.

Mystical Works and Final Years

After his miraculous escape from imprisonment in Toledo in 1578, Saint John of the Cross relocated to Andalusia, where he continued founding convents and promoting the Carmelite Reform. This period, spanning from 1578 until his death in 1591, was especially fruitful in terms of his literary production and spiritual influence. During these years, he not only consolidated his legacy as a reformer but also composed his most significant works, which have become foundational texts of universal mystical literature.

Founding Convents and His Work in Andalusia

In Andalusia, John founded several convents in cities such as Baeza, Granada, and Málaga. In Baeza, he established a convent in 1579 and also served as rector of the College of Discalced Carmelites, dedicated to the formation of novices. His work in Baeza was crucial for solidifying the Reform's presence in southern Spain. However, it was in Granada where his spiritual and literary influence reached its height.

Between 1578 and 1579 in Granada, Saint John of the Cross composed his most important works: *Spiritual Canticle*, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, and *The Living Flame of Love*. These works, written in verse and accompanied by prose commentaries, represent the summit of his mystical thought and spiritual experience.

Spiritual Canticle: Inspired by the *Song of Songs* from the Bible, this poem describes the soul's journey toward union with God. Through a dialogue between the soul (the bride) and God (the Beloved), John explores the stages of mystical love, from the initial longing to the transforming union. The poem is rich in poetic imagery and symbols—such as the stag, the dark night, and the garden—that represent the soul's search and encounter with the Divine. *Spiritual Canticle* is not only a literary masterpiece but also a spiritual guide for those seeking to deepen their relationship with God.

The Ascent of Mount Carmel: This prose work is a mystical treatise that explores the spiritual purification required to attain union with God. John uses the metaphor of the mountain to represent the soul's ascending path, which must be stripped of all earthly attachments and pass through the "dark night" of the senses and the spirit. The work serves as a practical manual for spiritual life, filled with guidance and reflections on overcoming obstacles and advancing toward holiness.

The Living Flame of Love: Considered one of the pinnacles of mystical poetry, this poem expresses the experience of transforming union with God. John portrays divine love as a flame that consumes the soul, purifying it and uniting it with God in an act of pure and selfless love. The verses of this poem possess extraordinary beauty and depth, and they have inspired generations of believers and artists alike.

Master of Novices and Spiritual Director

During his time in Granada, Saint John of the Cross served as Master of Novices and spiritual director, guiding many along the path of the mystical life. His ability to communicate his spiritual experience and his profound understanding of the ways of God made him a deeply valued guide. Through his teachings and writings, he helped numerous religious and laypeople deepen their relationship with God and embrace a life of prayer and detachment.

Leadership Roles and the Spread of the Reform

In 1582, Saint John of the Cross was appointed Superior of several convents and Definitor General of the Discalced Carmelites—positions he used to further the spread of the Teresian Reform. During this time, he traveled extensively throughout Spain, founding new convents and consolidating those already established. He also revised and expanded the prose commentaries on his mystical poems, ensuring that his spiritual teachings were accessible and understandable to all.

Despite his success in promoting the Reform, John faced opposition within the Order, especially from Father Nicolás Doria, who had been elected Superior General of the Discalced Carmelites. Doria, more focused on administrative structure than on contemplative life, came into conflict with John, who championed a life rooted in austerity and deep prayer. This tension led to John's removal from key leadership roles in 1588, leaving him in a marginal position within the Order.

Final Years and Death

Despite these challenges, Saint John of the Cross continued his spiritual and literary work with humility and devotion. In 1591, he fell seriously ill with erysipelas, a painful skin infection that caused great suffering. Although he was transferred to the convent in Úbeda for medical care, his condition rapidly worsened.

On December 14, 1591, Saint John of the Cross died at the convent in Úbeda, uttering his final words: "Into Your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit." His death marked the conclusion of a life defined by suffering, surrender, and profound union with God. Despite the adversities he faced, his spiritual and literary legacy endured, making him one of the most influential mystics in the history of the Church.

Canonization and Legacy

Saint John of the Cross was canonized in 1726 by Pope Benedict XIII and declared a Doctor of the Church in 1926 by Pope Pius XI, in recognition of the theological and mystical depth of his writings. His work, characterized by rich symbolic and poetic language, has left an indelible mark on universal mystical literature and Christian spirituality. His teachings on the "dark night," detachment, and divine love continue to inspire spiritual seekers around the world, and his life remains a testimony to faith, humility, and total surrender to God.

TERESA, JOHN, AND NONDUALITY

The Christian mysticism of the Spanish Golden Age offers two extraordinary voices who, though following distinct paths, converge in the experience of union with the Divine: Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross. Both recount encounters with God that dissolve the separation between the soul and its Creator, yet they do so with language and a worldview that reveal important nuances. From a contemporary perspective—especially in light of nondual traditions such as Advaita Vedānta, Dzogchen, or *A Course in Miracles*—one could say that Saint John of the Cross represents a more radical form of nonduality, whereas Teresa of Ávila expresses a nonduality that is more affective, relational, and narrative.

A significant example in Teresa appears when she writes: *“While I was reflecting on this, just after receiving Communion and while still in the same prayer, I was wondering what the soul was doing at that moment. Then the Lord answered me: ‘All of it, My daughter, is dissolving so as to give itself more fully to Me. It is no longer it that lives, but I. Unable to grasp what it understands, it understands without understanding.’”* (*The Book of Her Life*, 18.14). In this experience, individual identity fades, and bodily and psychic references vanish. Yet the narrator remains present, confused, trying to understand what has occurred. A subject-object structure is still perceptible—a relationship with the Divine. Here, nonduality is implicit: it has been touched, but not articulated or embraced as a conscious principle.

In contrast, Saint John of the Cross describes a more radical disappearance of the self in the final stanza of *Dark Night of the Soul*:

*“There I remained, lost in oblivion;
my face reclined on the Beloved.
All ceased, and I abandoned myself,
leaving my cares forgotten
among the lilies.”*

There is no description of what happened, nor any attempt to understand it—only cessation. The soul is emptied of itself, without will, without thought, without care. God is no longer the Other, but the All. The union is such that there is no one left to recount it. The subject has been transcended.

Another Teresian passage that nuances her view of interiority appears in *The Book of Her Life*, 7.6: *“I saw with the eyes of the soul more clearly than I could have seen with those of the body.”* The distinction between sensory and spiritual perception underscores her conviction that truth is not grasped through bodily senses, but through a form of inner vision. This separation between the apparent world and interior reality reflects a nondual intuition: apparent duality is revealed as illusory from

the soul’s gaze. Nonetheless, there remains an observer who contemplates and nar- rates.

John, for his part, expresses this annulment of egoic identity in his commentary on the second stanza, when he writes: “*When the soul seeks peace and interior quiet, any effort to think or feel something will distract it and increase its sense of dryness and emptiness. [...] The more it tries to rely on thoughts or feelings, the more it will feel their absence, for that path no longer provides the comfort it once did.*” (*Dark Night of the Soul*, I.10.5). Thought and feeling—the usual means through which the self navigates experience—no longer serve a purpose. All that remains is interior silence.

Later, commenting on the verse “*with no other light or guide / than the one burn- ing in my heart,*” he states that this light “*is nothing other than an infused touch of love that the soul feels within itself, without knowing how or where it comes from*” (*Dark Night of the Soul*, II.1.2). There is no cognitive content or recognizable affective sentiment: only the energy of love in its barest form remains. In this night, the soul seeks neither knowledge, nor consolation, nor merit—it allows itself to be carried by what it does not understand, guided from within by a formless light.

To clarify these differences, a comparative chart may be helpful:

Aspect	Teresa of Ávila	John of the Cross
Tone	Emotional, narrative	Poetic, abstract
Type of union	Absorption of the soul in God	Dissolution of the self in the Beloved
Trace of the self	Present as a confused observer	None—everything has ceased
Language	Sensory, human, relational	Emptied, symbolic, without subject
God	A presence that absorbs	A presence that is everything
Purpose	To love God and be with Him	To become God by participation
Nonduality	Experiential, implicit	Ontological, explicit

Both mystics live the same Reality, but their ways of expressing it reveal different modes of access. Teresa represents the path of love, of dialogue with the Beloved, of experience as transformative narrative. John embodies the path of emptiness, si- lence, and negation, where only the formless Presence remains. In this sense, while Teresa retains an affective trace of duality, John reaches an apophatic expression that closely approaches the purest discourses of nonduality.

Both voices are essential. Teresa humanizes the experience of the Divine; John reveals its nakedness. Together, they offer a complete image of the spiritual journey: a path that leads from the desire for union to the dissolution of all distance.

This text is intended to accompany and contextualize a modernized reading of *Dark Night of the Soul*, allowing the reader to recognize in its verses not only a

poetics of renunciation, but also a metaphysics of Being that transcends devotional forms. The comparison with Teresa of Ávila does not seek to contrast by opposition, but by complementarity: to show that the mystery of the Divine is revealed both in embodied love and in formless silence. Thus, Teresa and John appear not as two conflicting visions, but as two facets of a single spiritual awakening that culminates—beyond all imagery—in the direct experience of Unity.

Songs of the Soul

*1. On a dark night,
inflamed with love and yearnings—
oh, blessed fortune!—
I went out unseen,
my house now at rest.*

*2. In darkness and secure,
by the secret ladder, in disguise—
oh, blessed fortune!—
in darkness and concealment,
my house now at rest.*

*3. On that happy night,
in secret, when no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything,
with no other light or guide
than the one burning in my heart.*

*4. This light guided me
more surely than the noonday sun,
where He was waiting for me,
Whom I knew so well,
and no one appeared.*

*5. Oh guiding night!
Oh night more lovely than the dawn!
Oh night that joined
Beloved with His beloved,
beloved transformed in the Beloved!*

*6. Within my blossoming breast,
kept wholly for Him alone,
there He lay sleeping,
and I delighted Him,
while the breath of the cedars fanned the air.*

*7. In the breeze from the ramparts,
as I loosed His locks,
with His gentle hand
He wounded my neck
and all my senses were suspended.*

*8. There I remained, lost in oblivion;
my face reclined on the Beloved.
All ceased, and I abandoned myself,
leaving my cares forgotten
among the lilies.*

COMMENTARY ON THE SONGS

The eight songs of the soul that compose the *Dark Night* are, in fact, a single song unfolded in eight stanzas, in which the soul—once transformed—narrates the process of its passage from the night of the senses to full union with God. Although unfinished in its written development, the work of Saint John of the Cross reveals, in its entirety, a coherent and deeply symbolic spiritual architecture. Each of these stanzas contains a stage of the path, a key to the process of inner detachment and transformation.

The first song describes the soul's departure in the midst of the dark night, guided only by the inner fire of divine love. The act of going out "*in darkness and secure*" expresses the confident abandonment to God when all else has been darkened. This stanza gives rise to the First and Second Books of the work, which Saint John develops in detail to explain the night of the senses and the night of the spirit. The soul, purified through these nights, is now ready for union.

The second song is, in a sense, an echo of the first, but on a higher plane. It repeats the images of the night, the secret ladder, the spiritual disguise, to reveal how the soul—already immersed in the contemplative life—ascends silently by faith, hope, and charity. This part was also directly commented on by Saint John up to chapter 25, marking the conclusion of the preserved commentary.

The third song, which he barely begins to gloss, becomes the starting point of the Third Book. There begins the task of continuing along the path opened by the saint: to explain the remaining verses, meditatively completing what was left in silence. This third stanza shows the soul already illuminated, walking in secret, guided only by the love burning within, with no need for any other light. It is the testimony of an inner maturity that no longer depends on rational understanding, but surrenders itself entirely to the Beloved.

The fourth song introduces a tone of revelation and encounter: the soul has arrived at the place of the Beloved, and knows it with certainty. "*Where He was waiting for me / Whom I knew so well*" indicates the deep mutual recognition between the soul and God. This place "*and no one appeared*" represents the interior solitude, free of all image and noise, where the soul knows it is at home.

The fifth song bursts into praise of the night itself: "*Oh night that united / Beloved with His beloved, / beloved in the Beloved transformed!*" Here the night is no longer torment, but the glorious means by which union has occurred. The soul is not only united with God, but transformed in Him, sharing in His being. This verse is, in a sense, the thematic center of the entire work: the spiritual espousal, the metamorphosis of the soul in God.

The sixth song describes a scene of absolute intimacy. The soul speaks of the place of its loving surrender, of the sweet wound of the Beloved, of the sleep upon the blossoming breast, of the breeze among the cedars... Everything in this stanza

speaks of the rest after the offering, of the love that rests, of the mystical joy that no longer needs words.

The seventh song enters into the mystery of the transformed senses: perception is no longer of the world, but of the Beloved. *“And all my senses were suspended”* indicates that there is no longer any barrier between the outer and the inner; all is absorbed in the One. The soul now lives from within the unity, from the formless contemplation in which all created things speak of her Beloved.

The eighth and final song is the song of consummation. The Bride sings to the Beloved among the lilies, a symbol of the soul’s essential innocence, in the serene garden, without watchfulness, in a definitive mystical peace. It is the stanza of the fully united and transformed soul, where the Beloved rests His face in peace. The soul has ceased to seek; now it simply contemplates.

This collection of songs forms a symbolic map of the mystical process. Each stanza is a step on the ladder of love, a stage in the process of dying to the self to live in God. And although the written work comes to a halt, the song does not cease. In every reader, in every thirsty soul, this poem begins again. For the dark night is not, in truth, the end—but the threshold of true light.

PROLOGUE

In this book, all the songs to be explained are first presented together. Then, each song is analyzed individually, with the full text of the song placed before its explanation, and each verse is subsequently broken down one by one, with the verse also placed at the beginning of its commentary.

The first two songs explain the effects of the two forms of spiritual purification: one that affects the senses and another that affects the spirit. The remaining six describe various and wondrous effects of spiritual illumination and of the union of love with God.

BOOK ONE

Begins the explanation of the songs on the path the soul follows to unite in love with God, by Father Friar John of the Cross.

Before beginning to explain these songs, it is important to understand that the soul expresses them after having reached perfection—that is, the union of love with God. This occurs only after it has passed through great difficulties and trials along the narrow path of spiritual practice that leads to eternal life, the very path Jesus speaks of in the Gospel (Matthew 7:14).¹ Ordinarily, the soul must travel this path in order to attain such a sublime and blessed union with God.

This path is so arduous and so few walk it (as the Lord also says in Matthew 7:14) that the soul regards it as a great joy and blessing to have endured it and to have arrived at the perfection of love. In the first song, it refers to this process as a “dark night,” a very fitting image, as will be explained in the verses of the song.

Thus, filled with joy at having overcome this difficult journey and for the graces it has received along the way, the soul exclaims:

On the Night of the Senses

FIRST SONG

*On a dark night,
inflamed with love and yearnings—
oh, blessed fortune!—
I went out unseen,
my house now at rest.*

EXPLANATION:

1. In this first song, the soul recounts how, out of love, it succeeded in detaching itself from all things, dying to them and to its own self through genuine mortification. Only in this way could it attain a life sweet and full in the love of God. It describes this detachment as a *dark night*, which here symbolizes purifying contemplation. This contemplation, experienced passively by the soul, gradually frees it from all attachment to self and to the world.

2. The soul states that it was able to leave itself behind thanks to the strength and ardor given to it by the love of its Spouse (God) through this dark contemplation. It also expresses the great joy it felt in advancing toward God by this difficult path with success, since none of its three great enemies—the world, the devil, and the flesh (that is, human desires and passions)—could stop it. This is because the night of purifying contemplation had weakened and diminished all its passions and desires within.

And so the verse says:

“On a dark night.”^{II}

^I Matthew 7:14: “*For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*”

^{II} Saint John of the Cross begins *Book One* by announcing that he is going to explain the soul’s songs once it has reached perfection. This is essential: he is not speaking of the process as it happens, but from the perspective of one who has already arrived at the goal. What the soul sings in these verses is not a theory or an aspiration, but the expression of a fulfilled experience: the transforming union with God.

Yet, paradoxically, that final exaltation has its roots in a process of emptiness, darkness, and negation. Saint John emphatically states that this union is not attained without first passing through a narrow and difficult path—the very path spoken of by Jesus in the Gospel. This path is what he calls the *dark night*. And even in this introduction, he gives us the fundamental key to the work: this night is not merely a stage to be endured in order to reach something else; it is the very path of

transformation. It is the inner process by which the soul is emptied of all that is not God—including even its own image of God—so that He Himself may fill it with His being.

The soul that speaks in these songs has walked that path of death and rebirth. It has experienced the radical stripping away of its consolations, supports, ideas, and securities. It has passed through the night of the senses and the night of the spirit, which Saint John now begins to comment on from its very first steps. That is why it can now sing with joy: “*Oh, blessed fortune!*” Not because the night was easy, but because, seen from the goal, it reveals its luminous meaning.

The very title preceding the song gives us the key: *On the Night of the Senses*. This first book focuses on the purification of the soul’s sensitive part—that zone of desires, appetites, and affections that tend to be attached to the material world and to spiritual consolations. To walk toward God, the soul must learn to detach from all of this, to allow itself to be guided by naked faith, without relying on what it perceives or feels.

In this introduction, Saint John also establishes a spiritual pedagogy: he shows that the mystical path is not reserved for a privileged few, but is the path offered to every soul that truly desires to love God. But he also warns that few dare to follow it to the end, for it requires courage, detachment, and surrender.

The reader who approaches this first book must do so with reverence and honesty, knowing that Saint John does not intend to offer easy comforts or formulas for spiritual self-help. What he offers is a firm guide for those who wish to follow God to the depths, whatever the cost. And he does so with the authority of one who has walked that path and returned to tell of it—as a witness to the night that leads to the light.

CHAPTER 1

The first verse is presented and the discussion of the imperfections of beginners begins.

1. The soul begins to enter this *dark night* when God draws it out of the state of beginners—that is, those still in the meditative stage of the spiritual journey—and starts leading it toward the state of the more advanced, who are the contemplatives.¹ This is so that, by passing through this stage of purification, the soul may ultimately reach the state of the perfect, which is the divine union of the soul with God.

To better understand what this *dark night* is and why God leads the soul along this path, it is necessary first to explain some characteristics of beginners in the spiritual life. Although we will treat this subject as briefly as possible, this explanation will also be of great benefit to those who find themselves in that initial stage, for by recognizing the fragility of their current condition, they may be encouraged to desire that God bring them into this night, where the soul is strengthened in virtue and prepared to receive the inestimable gifts of divine love. Even if we dwell on this point for a while, it will be no longer than necessary to later understand the *dark night* more clearly.

2. It is important to understand that when the soul decides to dedicate itself to the service of God with firmness and determination, He often supports and nourishes it with sweet spiritual consolations, much like a loving mother caring for her infant child: she keeps him warm in her arms, feeds him gentle milk, and carries him tenderly. Yet, as the child grows, the mother begins gradually to withdraw these comforts and, hiding her tender love, gives him a taste of bitterness instead of sweetness. She sets him down so that he may learn to walk, allowing him to face certain challenges in order to move beyond childish behavior and begin to grow strong in greater and more perfect things.

In the same way, the loving mother of God's grace, when the soul first begins to walk in His service with fervor and enthusiasm, acts similarly: she allows it to find great sweetness and delight in spiritual matters with little effort. The soul enjoys spiritual exercises and experiences deep joy in them, for God holds it close in His tender embrace, nourishing it like a newborn child (1 Peter 2:2–3).¹¹

3. For this reason, in this initial stage, the soul feels great delight in prayer and can spend long periods—even entire nights—in it. It is easily moved to penance and fasting and finds deep consolation in receiving the sacraments. All spiritual practices seem pleasant, and it feels comforted by participating in divine things. However, although beginners dedicate themselves greatly and with much effort to these practices, their commitment remains weak and imperfect from a spiritual standpoint.

The reason for this is that their motivation is not entirely pure, since their fervor relies mostly on the consolation and pleasure they find in these practices. Because they have not yet been tested by interior struggle nor developed firm virtue through perseverance in adversity, their works and spiritual exercises are filled with many imperfections.

It is natural for every soul to act according to the level of spiritual maturity it has reached. As beginners have not yet developed solid habits of virtue, their actions inevitably bear the fragility of those who have not yet been strengthened in the spiritual life. They are like weak children, whose will is easily swayed by the joy and satisfaction they find in their spiritual practices.

To understand this more clearly and to see how immature the actions of beginners can be, we will examine their faults in relation to the seven capital sins. We will present some of the many imperfections that commonly accompany souls in this state, showing how these defects often lie hidden beneath their good works. This will allow for a deeper understanding of the benefits of the *dark night*, since this purification is necessary to cleanse and strengthen the soul,

removing all these imperfections and leading it to greater perfection in union with God.^{III}

^I Saint John of the Cross refers to "those in the meditative stage" as the beginners in the spiritual life—that is, those who still depend on discursive meditation and reasoning in their relationship with God. In this phase, the soul uses its natural faculties—imagination, memory, and understanding—to reflect on divine truths and to engage in mental prayer.

Although the Jesuits are not the religious order most closely associated with the spirituality of Saint John of the Cross, they played an important role in the development of speculative spiritual paths within the Catholic tradition, especially during the 16th and 17th centuries. Their approach to spiritual life differed from the Carmelite one in several key aspects, though it also shared points of contact with the path described in *Dark Night of the Soul*.

The Society of Jesus, founded by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in 1540, promoted a spirituality rooted in the *Spiritual Exercises*—a structured method of meditation and discernment. This method emphasized the active use of imagination and reasoning in prayer, encouraging the practitioner to engage with scenes from the life of Christ or to reflect on their spiritual state in order to make concrete decisions in life.

Saint John of the Cross, by contrast, describes in *Dark Night of the Soul* how, at a certain point, the soul must abandon these discursive methods to enter a more passive experience of contemplation, in which God Himself acts in the person without the need for images or reasoning. While the Jesuits promoted active meditation, Saint John believed that, after an initial phase, the soul must yield entirely to divine action—even if this involves enduring periods of spiritual dryness.

Despite these methodological differences, the Jesuits also contributed significantly to theological speculation about mystical experience. Jesuit theologians such as Luis de la Puente and Alfonso Rodríguez wrote treatises on prayer, acknowledging the existence of advanced states of contemplation similar to those described by Saint John of the Cross. Even Francisco Suárez, an influential Jesuit philosopher and theologian, contributed to the systematization of mysticism within scholastic theology.

While some Jesuits were open to Carmelite mysticism, Ignatian spirituality tended to focus more on action, practical discernment, and evangelizing mission, whereas the Carmelite tradition—especially that of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa—emphasized deeper, sometimes passive contemplation and a radical detachment from the world. This occasionally led to tensions between Jesuits and Carmelites, particularly regarding how the faithful were to be guided in the spiritual life.

In conclusion, although the Jesuits did not propose a spiritual path identical to that of Saint John of the Cross, they played a significant role in the theological reflection on prayer and contemplation. Their meditative method provided a foundation for many in the initial stages of the spiritual path, while the Carmelites developed a more detailed doctrine of the advanced stages of mystical life.

II 1 Peter 2:2–3: *“Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”*

III This chapter marks a silent yet crucial threshold in the spiritual journey: the moment when the soul is called to leave behind the stage of initiation—so fervent, so full of tenderness and spiritual sweetness—to enter a far more demanding terrain, where the senses no longer sustain the path, and the light begins to fade. Saint John does not state it outright, but he strongly implies it: this is where true spiritual maturity begins.

God’s pedagogy, compared to that of a mother, reveals that spiritual growth requires frustration. There is no progress without loss. This chapter, therefore, can be read as a warning against a very subtle trap: confusing fervor with maturity, enthusiasm with genuine surrender. Saint John does not diminish the value of the initial stages—on the contrary, he acknowledges them as necessary and blessed—but he warns that they are not the final destination. To remain there, always seeking consolations and sensory confirmations, is like expecting a child never to walk because he prefers his mother’s arms.

At its core, this first chapter reminds us that God acts as the true educator of the soul: He does not want us to love Him only for what He gives, but to come to love Him for Himself, even in His apparent absence. This is why spiritual consolations, so generously offered at first, are later withdrawn. The soul is thus pushed into the night: a darkness that is not punishment, but maturation. Here it begins to love by faith, not by feeling; with the will, not the appetite; with trust, not with certainty.

This chapter also establishes an essential teaching for the contemporary reader: the spiritual life is not measured by emotional intensity nor by the frequency of sweet experiences, but by the ability to remain faithful even when everything becomes dry, dark, or incomprehensible. God, who at first seems so near and clear, becomes increasingly mysterious... but only so that the soul may learn to desire Him truly—not for what He gives, but for what He is.

Here begins true purification: when the soul no longer seeks God like a child craving an embrace, but like a lover who, even in absence, continues to say “yes.” The night begins as a stripping away, but it holds a secret promise: the birth of a purer, freer, more divine love.

CHAPTER 2

On Some Spiritual Imperfections Related to Pride in Beginners

1. Since these beginners often feel very motivated and enthusiastic about spiritual matters and devout practices, there sometimes arises—despite the fact that the sacred should humble—a hidden form of pride, due to their imperfections. This leads them to feel a certain self-satisfaction in their works and within themselves.

They may also develop a desire—sometimes superficial, other times quite vain—to speak about spiritual topics in front of others, even to teach rather than to learn. At times, they silently judge others for not displaying the same level of devotion they expect, and occasionally they voice these criticisms aloud. They act like the Pharisee in the Gospel who boasted of his deeds while despising the publican (Luke 18:11–12).^I

2. The devil often takes advantage of this situation by increasing their fervor and eagerness to do more good works so that pride and presumption may grow within them. He knows well that, when these acts are performed with such an attitude, all those good works and virtues not only become fruitless, but can actually turn into vices.

Some go so far as to be unable to see any good in others—only in themselves. Thus, when given the chance, they criticize and speak poorly of others, focusing on their minor flaws without noticing their own. As Jesus said, they “see the speck in their brother’s eye, but not the plank in their own” (Matthew 7:3), and they “strain out a gnat and swallow a camel” (Matthew 23:24).^{II}

3. Sometimes, when their spiritual guides—such as confessors or superiors—do not approve of their way of acting (since they desire their works to be praised), they conclude that these guides do not understand them or are not spiritual enough to recognize their value. As a result, they seek out others who will admire and affirm them,

while avoiding—almost as if by instinct—those who would correct them or lead them on a safer path. In some cases, they even grow resentful toward those who challenge them.

They tend to talk a lot and do little. They often want others to perceive their devotion and spirituality, expressing it outwardly through sighs, emotional displays, or even public raptures—more so than in private—something in which the devil can also have a hand. They enjoy being seen in this light, and in many cases, they seek such recognition.

4. Many seek special favor or closeness with their confessors, which can lead to envy and conflict. They also feel ashamed to confess their sins as they are, fearing that their confessors will think poorly of them, and so they downplay or soften their confessions. Instead of sincere acknowledgment, they attempt to justify themselves.

Sometimes they even go to another confessor to speak of their faults, so that the first will not think less of them and will continue to view them positively. They prefer to speak of their virtues and, at times, even exaggerate them to appear better than they are. True humility, as we will see later, would mean not seeking recognition at all, and even desiring that no one think highly of them.

5. Some minimize their faults, while others become overly frustrated when they fall into them, thinking they should already be saints, and grow impatient with themselves—another imperfection. They often desire God to take away their faults, not out of love for Him, but to avoid inner discomfort and attain peace. They do not realize that, if God were to remove these faults, they might become even more proud and presumptuous.

They dislike praising others, yet they crave praise themselves, even seeking recognition. In this they resemble the foolish virgins of the parable, who, finding their lamps without oil, went out to seek it elsewhere (Matthew 25:8).**III**

6. Some experience these imperfections frequently and intensely, which can lead to serious spiritual issues. Others deal with them to a lesser degree, and still others experience only initial impulses. It is rare to find a beginner who, during the period of spiritual fervor, does not fall into some of this.

But those who are progressing toward perfection behave quite differently, with a far more humble spirit. They benefit from and grow through humility, not only downplaying their actions but taking little satisfaction in them. They consider others far superior and feel a holy envy, wishing they could serve God as they do. The more fervently they act and the more good works they perform, the more aware they are of how much God deserves and how little they have done for Him. Thus, the more they do, the less satisfied they feel. Their love and desire to serve God are so great that everything they do seems insufficient. This desire is so strong that they pay no attention to what others do or do not do. And when they do notice, they always assume others are better than they are. Because they do not value themselves, they also desire that others not value them or their works.

Furthermore, even when others attempt to praise or admire them, they cannot accept it and find it strange that anyone would speak well of them.

7. These souls, with great calm and humility, desire to learn from anyone who might help them grow spiritually. This is the complete opposite of those described earlier, who always want to teach others and, even when they appear to be learning, interrupt to show they already know. But the humble do not want to be anyone's teacher and are willing to change course if asked, never believing they are in the right. They rejoice in others being praised and feel only sorrow that they themselves do not serve God as others do.

They feel no need to speak of their spiritual experiences, considering them too insignificant, even being ashamed to share them with their spiritual guides, believing they are unworthy of mention. They prefer to speak of their faults and sins—or to have others know

them—rather than speak of their virtues. They usually seek spiritual direction from those who least admire their achievements, which reveals a simple, pure, and sincere spirit—very pleasing to God. Because the wise Spirit of God dwells in these humble souls, He leads them to keep their spiritual treasures hidden and to reveal their flaws. God grants this grace to the humble, along with other virtues, while He withholds it from the proud (James 4:6).^{IV}

8. These souls would give their very heart for those who serve God and would do everything in their power to help others serve Him as well. When they notice their own imperfections, they accept them with humility and patience, placing their trust in God with love and reverence.

Yet very few souls advance with this degree of perfection from the beginning. It would be enough if they did not fall into the opposite. That is why, as we will see later, God leads those whom He desires to purify through the *dark night*, to cleanse them of all these imperfections and help them advance along the spiritual path.^V

^I Luke 18:11–12: “*The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’*”

^{II} Matthew 7:3: “*Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?*”

Matthew 23:24: “*You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!*”

^{III} Matthew 23:24: “*You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!*”

^{IV} James 4:6: “*But He gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’*”

^V Saint John of the Cross demonstrates remarkable insight in his analysis of spiritual pride—one of the most subtle traps on the journey toward God. His reflection reveals a deep understanding of human psychology and of the ways in which the ego can infiltrate even the interior life, obstructing the soul’s true growth.

The clarity with which Saint John exposes this weakness closely mirrors the teaching of Saint Teresa of Ávila, who, in *The Interior Castle*, likewise warns against the illusion of believing oneself spiritually advanced when, in reality, the soul is still

caught in self-affirmation and vanity. Both mystics agree that true spiritual maturity is not measured by extraordinary sensations or lofty insights, but by humility and complete dependence on God.

This chapter is an uncomfortable gem. It shows that, on the path to God, one of the greatest dangers is not overt sin, but poorly digested virtue. Saint John makes it clear that pride does not always appear as blatant arrogance: sometimes it disguises itself as zeal, fervor, or apparent wisdom. In the spiritual life, the ego quickly learns to camouflage itself.

There is a particularly piercing lesson here: it is possible to be doing everything “right” and still be trapped in oneself. The beginner soul, still nourished by pleasure and recognition, can become more concerned with its spiritual image than with God Himself. Spirituality then becomes a refined form of self-affirmation—a trap much harder to detect than visible sins.

This chapter calls us to loving inner vigilance—not a neurotic one. It urges us to be wary of our desire to teach, to correct, to be heard. It invites us to prefer silence to applause, and correction to admiration. It reminds us that true spiritual progress is not something visible from the outside: the closer the soul draws to God, the smaller it sees itself.

Thus, this warning becomes an invitation: the one who recognizes these subtle forms of pride within is already on the way. Humility begins when we stop defending our supposed sanctity and dare to be little—without pretending.

CHAPTER 3

On Some Imperfections Common Among Beginners Regarding the Second Capital Vice, Which Is Spiritual Avarice

1. Many of these beginners also experience a kind of spiritual avarice, as they are almost never content with the spiritual consolations that God gives them. They feel discouraged and complain when they do not find the comfort they desire in spiritual things. Some never tire of seeking advice, learning spiritual teachings, or collecting and reading books on spiritual topics. At times, they spend more energy on these pursuits than on practicing mortification and cultivating the interior poverty of spirit that they should be striving for.

Moreover, they surround themselves with religious images and ornate rosaries, constantly changing them or searching for new styles and designs. They grow more attached to one cross than to another simply because it is more aesthetically pleasing. Some even adorn themselves with *agnus dei*, relics, and devotional trinkets as if they were children with charms.^I

It is not the use of these objects that is problematic, but the attachment they form toward them—seeking variety and refinement, which runs contrary to poverty of spirit. This virtue seeks only the essence of devotion, using the bare minimum necessary to nourish faith while avoiding the complications of variety and superficial details. True devotion must arise from the heart, focusing on the spiritual meaning of things rather than on their outward appearance.^{II} For this reason, progressing toward perfection requires overcoming such attachments.

2. I knew a person who, for over ten years, used a crudely made cross fashioned from a blessed tree branch, pinned together with a thorn and wrapped with thread, and never changed or abandoned it until I myself removed it; and this was not someone lacking knowledge or understanding. I also knew another who prayed with beads made from fish-bone spines, and their devotion was no less

pleasing to God for using something so humble, for it was evident that their faith did not depend on the material value of the object.

Those who are well guided from the beginning do not become attached to visible objects or surround themselves with them, nor do they feel the need to know more than is necessary for right action. They seek only to please God and to remain in right relationship with Him, and their sole desire is to delight Him. That is why they give generously of what they have and rejoice in having nothing left, for love of God and neighbor—whether the possessions are material or spiritual. Their only concern is to advance in inner perfection and to please God, not to gratify themselves.^{III}

3. Still, as with the other imperfections, the soul cannot completely purify itself of these tendencies until God brings it into the passive purification of the *dark night*, which we will discuss later.

Nonetheless, the soul must strive with all its might to progress in perfection so as to merit being led by God into that divine healing, where it will be cured of what it could not overcome on its own. For, no matter how much it tries, the soul cannot purify itself actively to the point of being fully prepared for divine union in the perfection of love—unless God Himself takes hold and purifies it in that dark fire of which we shall speak later.^{IV}

^I The *Agnus Dei* is a devotional object in the Catholic tradition, its name in Latin meaning “Lamb of God.” It consists of a wax disc or medallion, usually depicting a lamb with a cross—symbol of Christ as the redemptive sacrifice. These objects were traditionally made from the wax of the previous year’s Paschal candles and were blessed by the Pope on specific occasions, typically during years of his coronation or in jubilee years.

Historically, the *Agnus Dei* has been regarded as a sign of protection and grace. However, Saint John of the Cross criticizes its excessive use when it becomes a mere amulet—that is, when people wear it with a superstitious trust in its power rather than placing their faith in God.

^{II} This important passage emphasizes the danger of confusing form with substance in the spiritual life. Saint John of the Cross warns against those who believe that piety consists in the display of religious objects, external practices, or visible

signs, without a genuine interior commitment to God. True devotion is not found in collecting relics or mechanically repeating prayers, but in the profound transformation of the soul—in humility and sincere love.

This error is akin to that of the Pharisees in the Gospel, who meticulously observed external rituals yet lacked true inner conversion. Saint John of the Cross reminds us that what is essential in the spiritual life is not appearance, but the intention of the heart and the willingness to be guided by God—beyond sensible consolations or visible forms of devotion.

III This line, also of great importance, highlights a central teaching of Saint John of the Cross: holiness is not founded on one's own opinion or self-affirmation, but on the genuine desire to please God. Often, those beginning the spiritual path seek to feel good about themselves, measuring their progress by personal perceptions or sensory experiences. However, true growth in interior perfection requires letting go of the ego, of the need for approval, and of personal satisfaction.

Saint John of the Cross warns us that holiness does not consist in achieving states of consolation or in feeling spiritually advanced, but in complete surrender to the will of God—even when this means passing through dark nights of dryness and disorientation. True surrender is measured by humility and by the soul's willingness to accept divine purification, without relying on its own opinions or its personal judgment about its spiritual progress.

IV This paragraph underscores the impossibility of attaining holiness by one's own means and the necessity that it be God who completes the work of purification in the soul. Saint John of the Cross explains that, although a person must do all they can to advance in the spiritual life, their effort alone will never be sufficient to achieve divine union. This is because holiness precisely involves the dissolution of the ego, and it would be a contradiction for the ego to eliminate itself by its own will.

The soul may practice virtue, engage in prayer, and seek perfection, but there are limits it cannot surpass without the direct action of God. The definitive purification occurs when God takes control and immerses the soul in the *dark night*—a process of detachment and transformation that does not depend on human effort, but on divine grace. Saint John of the Cross warns us against the illusion that one can make oneself holy, because true holiness only comes when the soul relinquishes all control and allows itself to be shaped by the purifying fire of God.

CHAPTER 4

On Other Imperfections Common Among Beginners Regarding the Third Capital Vice, Which Is Lust

1. In addition to the imperfections already discussed with each vice, many beginners also fall into others, but to avoid excessive length, I will speak only of the principal ones, since these often give rise to the rest.

Regarding the vice of lust (setting aside the sin of lust itself, as I am here addressing only those imperfections that are to be purified in the *dark night*), many beginners display what might be called *spiritual lust*. This is not lust in the strict sense, but it arises from spiritual experiences.

At times, during spiritual exercises—without willing it or being able to avoid it—sensual stirrings and desires may arise within. This can happen even in deep prayer or while receiving the sacraments of Penance or the Eucharist. These impulses are not their fault, as they are not deliberately provoked, and usually stem from one of three causes.

2. The first cause is the natural pleasure experienced in spiritual things. As both spirit and senses rejoice and find consolation in them, each part of the person seeks its own delight. While the spirit delights in God, the sensitive part—the lower faculties—seeks its own form of enjoyment, not knowing how to rejoice in any other way. It therefore gravitates toward sensual pleasure, the closest form of delight to its nature.

Thus, the soul may be profoundly absorbed in prayer, experiencing deep union with God in the spirit, while at the same time, without intending it, experiencing sensual desires in the body. This also occurs during Communion, because as the soul receives love and consolation from God—since Christ offers Himself in the Eucharist—the

sensitive part likewise seeks its own pleasure, though in a disordered way.

This happens because body and spirit form a unified whole, and both participate in the experience according to their nature. As the Philosopher says, “whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver.” Therefore, in these early stages, and even at more advanced ones, the sensitive part—being not yet fully purified—receives God's grace imperfectly.¹

However, once this sensitive part is transformed by the purification of the *dark night* (which we will discuss later), it no longer suffers from these weaknesses. It is no longer the lower faculties that receive grace, but they are united with the spirit, and everything is experienced according to the spirit's mode.

3. The second cause of these disordered desires is the devil. He seeks to disturb and agitate the soul precisely when it is in prayer or attempting to pray, provoking impure stirrings. If the soul allows itself to be troubled by them, the damage can be great, potentially leading it to abandon prayer altogether—which is exactly the devil's aim.

Some experience these temptations so frequently during spiritual exercises that they consider giving them up, thinking that outside of prayer they are not so afflicted. And to some extent, it is true, because the devil intensifies his attacks in those moments to discourage their spiritual practice.

The devil not only provokes sensual impulses but also introduces impure images into the mind—sometimes involving spiritual things or persons who support the soul's faith journey—to frighten or dishearten it. If the soul gives in to this fear, it may end up avoiding meditation or contemplation altogether, afraid of encountering such thoughts.

This occurs more intensely in those with a melancholic temperament, often leading to deep spiritual distress. In extreme cases, the suffering is so persistent that the person feels as if the devil is

constantly present and cannot shake the feeling, though some manage to overcome it with great effort.

When these impure thoughts stem from melancholia, they generally do not subside until the emotional state is healed. However, if the soul enters the *dark night*, this purification gradually overcomes such thoughts.

4. The third cause of these sensual stirrings is fear itself. Once a person has experienced such temptations, the fear of them causes them to arise involuntarily, without fault on the part of the soul.

5. Some souls are so sensitive and emotionally unstable that the moment they feel any spiritual consolation or enter into prayer, they immediately experience a kind of sensual excitement. This overwhelms them and brings such pleasure to the senses that they become caught in a mixture of spiritual joy and sensual delight, unable to prevent it. Sometimes, they even become aware that they have had sensual thoughts or impulses unintentionally. This is due to their extreme sensitivity: any emotional change affects their humors and their blood, triggering these reactions. The same happens when they become angry, worried, or emotionally disturbed.

6. At times, beginners also feel a sense of pride or satisfaction when performing or speaking about spiritual acts, especially when aware of the people around them. This is a kind of inner vanity which, as understood here, stems from a subtle form of *spiritual lust*, since it is rooted in self-satisfaction and self-will.

7. Some beginners also form attachments to certain individuals under the appearance of spiritual love, when in reality it arises from sensuality, not from the spirit. This becomes evident when recalling the person does not lead them to greater love or remembrance of God, but rather leaves them with a troubled conscience.

When the affection is truly spiritual, thinking of that person increases the memory and love of God. The more they recall the individual, the more they are drawn to God and the more their desire for

Him grows—both loves rising together. This occurs because the Spirit of God causes goodness to grow in harmony, as there is conformity between them.

But when the affection arises from sensual desire, the opposite happens: the more that human love grows, the more the love of God diminishes and grows cold. If that human affection increases, divine love fades, and the conscience becomes uneasy. Conversely, if the love of God grows, the other love cools and is forgotten, because the two are contrary.

This is so because these two kinds of love oppose each other: one not only fails to help the other but actively suppresses and weakens it, strengthening itself—as philosophers say. Thus, our Savior said in the Gospel (John 3:6), “*What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.*” That is, love born of sensuality remains sensual, while love born of the spirit grows in the Spirit of God. This is how one distinguishes between the two.

8. When the soul enters the *dark night*, all these affections are rightly ordered, for the love that comes from God is strengthened and purified, while the other weakens and vanishes. At first, both loves may seem to fade, as will be explained later.[¶]

¶The philosopher Saint John of the Cross refers to in this passage is Aristotle. The phrase “*whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver*” is a classical formulation of the principle of reception, which Aristotle presents in his *Metaphysics*, and which was later developed in medieval scholasticism, especially by Saint Thomas Aquinas. This principle means that any knowledge, impression, or experience is received and processed according to the capacity and nature of the one who perceives it.

In the context of *Dark Night of the Soul*, Saint John of the Cross applies this principle to the spiritual life: the grace of God is infinite and perfect, but the soul receives it in a limited way according to its state of purification. As long as the soul is still influenced by the senses and has not been completely transformed, its way of receiving grace is imperfect, since it filters it through human limitations. Only when God fully purifies the soul can it receive His light in a complete and undistorted way.

■ In this chapter, Saint John of the Cross ventures into delicate territory: the confusions that arise when body and soul intersect on the spiritual path. In beginners, sensual impulses do not vanish merely because one prays. In fact, they often intensify precisely when the soul draws nearer to the sacred. This phenomenon is disconcerting and can lead many to blame themselves, to withdraw, or to believe they are doing something wrong. But this text reminds us that such is not the case: what is happening is that light is beginning to reveal the soul's inner shadows.

One of the most revealing insights is that the body, too, seeks to delight in God in its own way. *Spiritual lust* is nothing more than the body's clumsy attempt to "understand" what is happening in the soul. The impurity, then, does not lie in the experience of sensation itself, but in the fact that the soul has not yet been fully purified. Saint John does not condemn weakness, but he does warn against naivety: if we fail to distinguish pure love from disguised desire, we may fall into very refined self-deceptions.

This chapter also serves as a map for discernment. It provides keys to distinguish between spiritual affection and sensual attachment disguised as love. The test is simple yet infallible: authentic love draws us closer to God, while the other leads us away. Though this distinction may seem obvious, it becomes subtle when the soul, filled with enthusiasm, projects its emotional needs onto those who accompany it on the journey.

What is most beautiful about this chapter is its final promise: when the soul truly enters the *dark night*, all of this becomes ordered. Sensuality loses its power, and spiritual love is refined like a string tightened by fire. What was once a mixture becomes unity.

CHAPTER 5

On the Imperfections into Which Beginners Fall Concerning the Vice of Wrath

1. Because many beginners are attached to spiritual consolations, they frequently fall into several imperfections related to the vice of wrath. This happens when their delight and comfort in spiritual things come to an end—they become frustrated and, faced with that inner emptiness, grow irritable in what they do or say. They are easily angered by the slightest inconvenience and sometimes become difficult to endure.

This especially occurs after having experienced deep emotional consolation in prayer. When that pleasure fades, they naturally feel a void and a lack of motivation—similar to a child who is pulled away from the breast he was enjoying. This reaction is not a sin, but it is an imperfection that must be purified through the dryness and difficulty of the *dark night*.

2. There are also other beginners who fall into a different kind of spiritual wrath: they become angry when they see the faults of others, acting with uncontrolled zeal, criticizing and judging them. Sometimes they feel the urge to rebuke others harshly—and they do—believing themselves to be superior in virtue. All of this is contrary to spiritual gentleness.

3. Others, when they see their own imperfections, grow angry with themselves out of impatience and lack of humility. They become so frustrated that they wish they could become saints overnight. Many make grand resolutions and plans, but because they lack humility and have not yet learned to distrust their own strength, the more they resolve, the more they fall—and the angrier they become. They lack the patience to wait for God to grant them spiritual growth in His own time. This impatience runs contrary to spiritual meekness, and they cannot fully overcome it until they pass through the purification of the *dark night*.

Nevertheless, there are some who possess such patience in their desire for holiness that it might seem as though even God would marvel at their calm.¹

¹ This final passage carries a subtle irony in pointing out those who, in their eagerness to advance spiritually, seem so patient that even God might grow impatient with them. The paradox lies in the fact that, although patience is a virtue, Saint John of the Cross is referring here to an attitude that is not true patience, but rather a kind of passivity disguised as virtue.

The irony arises because such individuals believe they are demonstrating exemplary patience, when in reality they may be falling into complacency or spiritual stagnation—waiting for God to do everything without putting in their own effort. Saint John, with gentle humor, suggests that even God might find this attitude excessive, since the spiritual path demands an active disposition to cooperate with grace, not merely a passive waiting.

In this chapter, Saint John of the Cross points to a rarely explored phenomenon in spiritual manuals: *spiritual anger*. Unlike ordinary anger, which arises from external offenses, this form springs from an unresolved inner tension: the soul wants to advance more quickly than it is able, demands fruits before sowing deeply, and is outraged by its own weakness.

One of the most refined insights in the chapter is how the desire for consolation, if not purified, breeds irritation when spiritual delight fades. The soul has not yet come to love God for Himself, but rather for the sweetness He brings. And when that sweetness is withdrawn, impatience arises—like someone longing for a nourishment they had already claimed as their own.

But perhaps the most revealing point is how this anger is projected onto others. Instead of viewing its own process with humility, the beginner grows impatient with the faults of others, believing their own fervor grants them license to correct harshly. They forget that true virtue is not imposed but radiates gently.

This chapter is an uncomfortable, but necessary, mirror: it shows us that even good intentions, if not purified, can turn into rigidity, judgment, and spiritual unrest. The impatience to be saints can be more damaging than lukewarmness.

The remedy is already contained in the diagnosis: *humble patience*—that which does not despair over its falls nor take offense at the limitations of others. This patience is not passivity, but a loving acceptance of the pace at which God transforms the soul. And only when the soul stops fighting against what it is can it begin to become what it is called to be.

CHAPTER 6

On the Imperfections Related to Spiritual Gluttony

1. Regarding the fourth capital vice—spiritual gluttony—there is much to say, for nearly all beginners, however well-intentioned, fall into some of the many imperfections that arise from the pleasure they find at the outset of their spiritual exercises.

Many are drawn more by the delight and consolation they experience in these practices than by purity and sincerity in their relationship with God—which is what truly matters and what He values most on the spiritual path.

For this reason, in addition to the imperfections that stem from seeking such pleasures, their desire for consolation causes them to lose balance, pulling them away from the virtuous middle ground. Driven by the enjoyment they feel, some overdo their penances; others weaken their bodies with excessive fasting, going beyond what they can bear—often without order or guidance. Some even go so far as to disobey those to whom they owe spiritual submission in these matters, continuing even when expressly forbidden.

2. Such people are extremely imperfect and act without reason, placing bodily penance above obedience, which is a far more rational and prudent form of self-denial—and therefore more pleasing to God. Obedience is a more valuable sacrifice because it is done in humility and submission.

In contrast, bodily penance performed without obedience is no more than animal penance, pursued for the satisfaction and consolation it provides, like beasts driven by their appetites. By following their own desires, they fall into excess, and all excess is vicious. Thus, instead of growing in virtue, they reinforce their vices—acquiring at the very least spiritual gluttony and pride by not obeying in their practices.

The devil often spurs them on by intensifying their spiritual gluttony and inflaming their desire for consolations. When they cannot obtain more, they alter or abandon the prescribed exercises, finding all obedience bitter when it concerns their desires.

Some go so far as to lose all taste and devotion for these exercises simply because they must do them in obedience—showing that what truly moves them is not love of God, but their own satisfaction. In such cases, it might be better if they did nothing at all.

3. These beginners can often be seen stubbornly pressuring their spiritual directors to allow them to do as they please, sometimes succeeding through sheer insistence. If they fail, they become discouraged, grow resentful, and feel as though they are not serving God unless they are doing what they want.

This stems from their attachment to their own will and pleasure, which they have made into their god. Thus, when deprived of these and directed toward the will of God, they fall into spiritual sadness, lose motivation, and abandon their practices.

They mistakenly believe that by satisfying their desires, they are serving and pleasing God.

4. Others, driven by this spiritual gluttony, fail to recognize their weakness and misery, and have lost the holy fear and reverence they should feel before the greatness of God. Thus, they do not hesitate to pressure their confessors to allow them to receive Communion frequently.

Worse still, some even dare to receive Communion without the priest's permission—who is, after all, Christ's minister and steward—trusting only in their own judgment and concealing the truth. With the intention of receiving Communion, they make rushed and superficial confessions, more eager to receive the sacrament than to do so with purity and sincerity.

In reality, it would be healthier and more holy to adopt the opposite attitude—to ask their confessors not to permit them to receive so

often. But the best path is humble resignation, accepting whatever is prescribed. Yet some act with such arrogance and presumption that they deserve serious rebuke for their recklessness.

5. These individuals, when they do receive Communion, focus more on seeking some sensible feeling or pleasure than on humbly reverencing and praising God within. They are so attached to this pursuit of consolation that if they feel nothing, they think they have received no benefit—revealing a very limited understanding of God. They fail to grasp that the smallest effect of this Most Holy Sacrament is the one perceived by the senses, while the greatest is invisible: the grace God bestows.

To teach them to see with the eyes of faith, God often withdraws these consolations. Yet they still seek to feel and enjoy God as if He were something graspable and sensible—not only in Communion but in all spiritual exercises. This is a significant imperfection and goes against the true nature of God, for it reveals an impure faith.

6. The same applies to prayer. They believe its value lies in the enjoyment and consolation it brings, and so they labor to attain this, exhausting their thoughts and mind in the process. When they fail to achieve such pleasure, they become disheartened, thinking their prayer has yielded nothing.

With this mindset, they lose the true spirit and devotion of prayer, which consists in persevering with patience and humility, distrusting oneself, and praying solely to please God. Therefore, when they find no consolation in a prayer or spiritual exercise, they feel repulsed by it, try again without enthusiasm, and sometimes abandon it altogether. In this, they are like children, acting only when moved by pleasure, not by reason.

They constantly seek spiritual comfort and pleasure. Thus, they never tire of reading spiritual books, jumping from one meditation to another, as if they were hunting for delight in the things of God. But God, in His wisdom and love, often denies them these pleasures to prevent them from growing in gluttony and disordered desires.

For this reason, it is crucial that these souls pass through the *dark night*, which we will discuss later, so they may be purified of these spiritual immaturities.

7. Those who are so inclined toward seeking consolations also suffer from another serious imperfection: they are weak and lazy when it comes to following the difficult path of the cross. Because they are so accustomed to pleasure, it becomes very hard for them to face any suffering or self-denial.

8. These individuals also have many other imperfections that arise from this disposition, but the Lord occasionally heals them through temptations, dryness, and other sufferings that are part of the *dark night*.

I will not elaborate further on this here, except to add that spiritual sobriety and moderation require a very different approach—one rooted in mortification, reverence, and humility in all things. It is important to remember that the perfection and merit of spiritual works lies not in how much one does, nor in the consolation one receives, but in how much one is willing to deny oneself while doing them.

They should strive to do this as much as they can until God chooses to purify them by leading them into the *dark night*. And to that explanation I now turn, having completed the treatment of these imperfections.¹

¹ Spiritual Gluttony: When the Soul Seeks Flavor More Than Truth

This chapter unveils an uncomfortable truth: spirituality, too, can feed the ego. *Spiritual gluttony* is nothing more than a disordered craving for religious consolations—for gratifying experiences masked as piety. Saint John of the Cross touches a very timely nerve: the soul that seeks God as one seeks stimulation, not out of pure love.

The beginner's soul resembles a child who only eats what pleases its palate. In its search for spiritual sweetness, it becomes addicted to the sensible: it wants prayers that move, readings that inspire, Communions that can be felt. But this is not love—it is dependency. True love of God does not seek to feel, but to give itself—even when it receives nothing in return.

Saint John also denounces a common confusion: the belief that *more is better*. More practices, more penances, more Communions, more reading... But all this, if not born of the Spirit and governed by obedience, is not virtue—it is self-deception. Excess without discernment can lead the soul farther from God, not closer.

The key to this chapter lies in God's pedagogy: He withdraws consolation to teach the soul to love in dryness, to remain faithful when there is no sensory reward. It is in this nakedness that the maturity of love is revealed. And it is there that true prayer begins—the kind that is not dependent on feeling, but on offering.

Ultimately, this chapter is a call to move from a love that feeds on God to a love that gives itself to Him. The *dark night* is not imposed to punish the soul, but to purify its intention and free it from desire disguised as devotion. Only then can it taste the true banquet: God Himself, without additives.